

# UNION MODERNISATION FUND

**BERR**

Department for Business  
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## COMMUNITY AND YOUTH WORKERS' UNION (CYWU) – UMF MEMBERSHIP DIVERSITY PROJECT

CASE STUDY



# Community and Youth Workers' Union UMF membership diversity project

## Introduction

The Community and Youth Workers' Union (CYWU) represents predominantly play workers, community workers, learning mentors, youth workers and personal advisers working in local authorities and voluntary organisations. Professionally qualified youth workers working full time in local authorities form the bulk of the membership.

Unusually, the CYWU has influenced the way higher education recruits its students, pioneering access for non-traditional groups. Most CYWU members have come to their jobs as non-traditional entrants, without the usual qualifications required by higher education institutions for other professional courses. Students tend to be older than for other disciplines (some of them post retirement from a previous career) and there is a comparatively high proportion of black and minority ethnic students and those with disabilities.

The CYWU makes every effort to recruit from the student cohort and has a student committee and convenor. The national student conference attracts 60-90 students each year. The union provides training modules for university training courses on management, employment and trade union issues; it has produced a student charter;

and it has representatives on the development and advisory committees of many universities. It also has considerable influence in the committees that validate the training institutions and has argued successfully that youth work should become a graduate profession by 2010.

### Sector profile

- There are approximately 4,250 local authority-based, nationally qualified youth workers in England (the majority of CYWU membership).
- There are some 16,000 who deliver face-to-face work as part-time youth support workers.
- Around 55% of these have local youth support work qualifications.

## Background

The CYWU takes great pride in its ability to blend effective and modern trade union representation with the provision of specialist training and support to members. However, it works within a rapidly expanding sector, where policies are evolving and new funding is coming on stream for youth, community and play workers, and for personal advisers. With reform in the sector bringing a wider spectrum of workers into

the CYWU's radar, in 2003 the union had changed its constitution to make it more relevant to the wider range of jobs. General Secretary, Doug Nicholls explains:

*'New professions, such as learning mentors and personal advisers, emerged almost overnight, so we created places for these on our National Executive and strengthened our infrastructure, training and support systems. We were conscious, however, that the views of these new professionals were unplumbed in terms of their attitudes towards the union; we had to find out what we needed to do to best serve them and the other members and possible members. We have around 5,000 members but with the changes in the sector, there is much greater potential for a significantly enhanced membership. We need to reflect that in our services.'*

In parallel with the changes within the sector, the union was in the throes of merging with the Transport and General Workers' Union (TGWU), which added to the complexity of membership issues. Preserving a distinctive identity within the larger union was crucial.

#### **CYWU sector student profile**

- Almost all students studying youth and community work at higher education institutions (HEIs) are from working class communities.
- Entrants to courses must usually be aged 25 or over, with at least one year's voluntary or other youth work experience.
- There are 1,800 students in qualification training.
- Average age: 30
- Women: 63%
- BME: 35%
- Disabled: 17.5%

## **Why this project?**

The union needed to investigate and map this diverse sector to find out how best it could develop its representational and professional services to respond to the changing workforce, identifying both actual and potential needs to provide a basis for future strategies. Doug Nicholls emphasises the importance of focusing on research at this stage:

*'We're a small union, so we had no capacity to carry out the research without external funding. We structured the UMF project to be completed in nine months, with a possible future bid for funding additional work, depending on the outcome of the research. We are absolutely committed to providing a range of targeted services once we have the information to do so. A 'one size fits all' policy for members will not meet the need we believe exists.'*

The CYWU potentially represents an especially diverse membership: a large proportion of the workforce is comprised of part-timers or volunteers, highly motivated people who nevertheless often don't consider union membership to be relevant to them. Many work sporadic or unsocial hours and are therefore difficult for the union to reach. Even union activists have been found to work an average 47 hours per week; improved and better facilities and time off agreements for trade union functioning have been high on the agenda, with little success. To tackle the issues, the scale of diversity within the sector needed to be quantified. Says Doug Nicholls:

*'A significant proportion of our membership has working patterns and life experiences that are atypical when compared to many of those who are represented by trade unions. This is often accompanied by lower levels of engagement in the life of the union. We were not confident that we were reaching key groups from within our diverse membership as well as we do for*

*‘mainstream’ members. The UMF project was designed to allow us to better align our services to their needs. As we embarked on our merger with the TGWU, it was a priority to create a space within the union where these members feel comfortable and can fully participate in the new merged organisation. We need to ensure an effective voice within the union for all our membership and respond to the challenge of its diversity.’*

## Methodology

The union took advice from professional project managers, who helped them submit a successful bid to the Union Modernisation Fund (UMF). The project couldn’t be managed externally, however, since the changes were so fast moving and complex that the specialist knowledge within the union was fundamental to the project’s success. Consequently, the UMF project was managed by Doug Nicholls, whose expertise also meant time- and cost-savings. A project co-ordinator worked alongside him; key elements of the work, such as conducting the telephone poll and discussion groups, were subcontracted.

## Research

Research comprised:

- a comprehensive breakdown of existing members by ethnicity, job title, hours worked, qualifications and employer, using the existing membership database;
- interviews with union officials, branch officers and activists within target groups to explore their experiences within the sector and the union, as well as with non members;
- interviews with CYWU officers with experience of work with specific groups;
- focus groups with members and non members as well as with union activists at the CYWU conference;
- a telephone poll of 200 members within specific membership categories (long-standing members, new members, voluntary sector, black workers, women, rural and urban members) to test and confirm feedback of qualitative research, preceded by a mailed letter from the General Secretary;
- a survey of the 90 delegates at the student conference, which was returned at the end of the conference.

## Results

The surveys of members and non members were analysed by the Labour Research Department. Results included:

- youth support workers and play workers were identified as groups with particularly low levels of union participation;
- the telephone poll showed that both members and non members expected the union to be ‘a servicing union, an insurance and legal back-up in times of difficulty’;
- the conference was found to be an effective way to inform students about the union and engage them. One delegate commented, for instance, ‘It put the fire in me to be more of an activist.’ The conference informed them about ‘how and why I should get involved’ and ‘how CYWU act for students and that there is somebody to go to if problems arise – I was unaware there was anybody or anywhere to go’. Another realised that ‘students have a voice and can make a difference’;

- major issues highlighted in the research were fears of being subsumed by a larger union; and the perception of insufficient localised support and communication difficulties combining to produce barriers to accessing the union. Pay and working hours were also subjects for grievance;
- respondents expected the local branches to be much stronger as vocal national ambassadors; branches would need development and support for this to happen. Black and minority ethnic workers were seen as particularly poorly served;
- successful recruitment to the union, it was felt, comes from local face-to-face contact; communications were seen as underdeveloped and patchy.

## Recommendations

As a result of the UMF project, the following recommendations were made:

1. A major strategy of branch development should be undertaken and an application made for UMF funding to modernise all aspects of branch organisation and communications with branches and members; and to consider a branch model based on workplace stewards, branch recruitment across a wider range of occupations, and the relationship with student groups in local HEIs, with improvements in local facilities agreements.
2. Full-time organising support should be established for the student population.
3. Closer co-operation with the National Union of Students should be considered.
4. Ways should be considered of contributing occupationally specific points to the JNC negotiating process for youth and community workers; this should be possible through the TGWU merger arrangements.
5. New and significant areas for expansion in the community and voluntary sectors need to be explored.
6. A structured, well-funded organising and recruitment campaign should be launched.
7. The email database should be improved and a weekly e-bulletin produced in improved format.
8. The website should be comprehensively reorganised and updated and a regular updating mechanism introduced.
9. The union's national journal should be developed and contributions from members increased.
10. There should be new employment advice for the sector, with briefings and bulletins on a range of legal, equality and health-related issues.
11. There should be an NEC debate with the TGWU on diversity involvement and equality work.
12. Partnership arrangements should be considered with other organisations, reflecting the diversity of identities within the field.
13. A national recruitment strategy should be developed for youth support workers.

## Early outcomes

Nine initiatives were developed during the project as a direct result of discussions about making the union more appealing:

- a 'Pay Up for Play' campaign was launched, aimed at playworkers;

- a survey on workplace issues was circulated within the community work workforce;
- a particular focus on professional formation for youth workers is being enhanced;
- a new membership form was produced within the TGWU structure;
- there has been closer working with workforce reform issues through the new relationship with the TGWU;
- potential future leaders of the union have been identified and trained;
- new union officials from within the TGWU have been identified and trained to take responsibility for CYWU branches within the regions;
- an organising strategy has been developed for London in conjunction with the General Federation of Trade Unions (GFTU);
- a student conference has been organised.

Additional benefits have been: widespread discussion throughout the membership on the nature and future of the union; and more, possibly inactive, members being given an opportunity to consider the meaning of their membership.

## Looking ahead

As a result of the project, a complex set of strategies has already been agreed by the union to tackle proposals for growth and membership involvement. These will culminate in a further proposal to the organising department of the TGWU. Some changes already carried out include:

- **Union-specific training** – 40 young members were targeted specifically for union training, identified from the student conference or suggested by members of the National Executive as people who would benefit from specialist support and training. A proviso was that they must commit to three years' activity within the union in return. They were given structured residential training over two days, covering the history of the trade union movement, employment law, the structure and culture of CYWU, and the new union with which CYWU had merged. Says Doug Nicholls: 'The hope is they will become evangelists, active at a level they are happy with, at branch or national level'.
- **The union's professional journal**, Rapport, has been overhauled as a result of the survey: it is now more engaging visually and in tone and style; contributions from members reflect the more user-friendly layout. In response to requests highlighted in the survey, the journal, which is a useful recruitment tool, now includes more articles on professional practice and is seen as members' 'unique professional voice'.
- **Internal union communications** have been reviewed and some improvements made. For example, two thirds of members now receive a regular e-briefing.
- **New publicity materials for key groups** are being produced, linked to their main concerns.
- **The website** has been evaluated and is to be redesigned so that it is clearer and easier to navigate. Particular attention will be paid to the home page, the 'gateway' to the union and its services.
- **Special provision** was made in the instrument of transfer to the TGWU to protect specific groups of members.



**Doug Nicholls sums up:**

*'The project has been indispensable in directing our modernisation of the union in a rapidly changing context. It made us realise just how much effort and resource need to go into meaningful, sustainable union recruitment and organisation. We are proud of the way we blend effective trade union representation with our commitment to the professional development and support of our members who work in a challenging and demanding sector. We will be delighted to share our knowledge and experience of this project via the TUC and on our website. We will also disseminate our findings to employers in our industry and investigate the possibility of joint initiatives for future action. We are a small specialist trade union which has merged with larger partners and believe that our experience will be invaluable to other organisations who find themselves in a similar situation.'*

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*'Our sector is comprised of professionals whose job it is to empower people in their communities, so our members and potential members are very familiar with the techniques of democracy and empowerment for their clients. We have always been an empowering, lay-led union. Our concern in this project was to gather the evidence that would help us give un-represented workers a voice. Our subsequent communication strategy has been informed by the survey, including improvements to two-way communications, taking on board the perceptions and criticisms of respondents.'*









